

"Vain Tales"
by
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"Vain Tales"

BY MRS. HENRY DUDENEY

"YOU can't go on."

These words, spoken to him so finally, with such amazing, cool restraint, only two hours before, rang in his head as he stood peeping through the green-curtained window and blinking at the abominable blaze of the snow.

They mixed with the sounds of the house—children scrambling and shouting; Milly giving orders, curt, military-wise; the rushing of the young house-maid, who was as clumsy as an unbroken puppy.

"You can't go on!" It was very well to say that, but he had to go on. If he did not, those sounds which distressed him so would stop.

He began to analyze his feelings, leaving the window with its cheerful frosty glare, going to the quiet fire and lounging over it in the way which his loyal wife tried so hard not to think lazy. It had become of late that his eyes were the main part of him; they carried their complaint right through his head, so that sometimes he felt that he was going mad. If he went blind the pain would stop, and nothing else seemed to matter. If he went blind perhaps they would put him on the Civil List.

Now if he committed suicide, say that he did it dramatically, gave himself a thumping good advertisement as a send-off, they might put his widow on the Civil List. If he committed suicide, Milly would be immensely upset, but she would get over it. She was one of those sensible people who fortify themselves with the moral axiom, get behind the ineptitude of the proverb. Between her sobs she would say, "Well, it's no good crying over spilt milk!"

Suicide would be a thrifty thing to do; it suddenly presented itself to him as a morbid form of life-insurance. It would have to be thought out carefully, it must be on popular lines. He dallied with the idea; it consoled and engrossed him; so that he forgot to curse the

frost and the snow, the impudent, unwanted winter sun which hurt his eyes so. At first he was possessed by just a brutal desire of getting out of the world, of slipping his pain. Then spiritual feelings came, and he said to himself that he'd stay behind and write it up first, if only his eyes held out. He would put it upon paper.

Should it be hanging or drowning or poison? How many thousand words should it run to? He must remember to conserve all the drama of the thing. Then he would send it to some rag of a paper, just chuck it at them. Then he would go out and kill himself, according to directions.

"I'll sign it," he said, nodding impishly at the red coals, "though they'll never have heard of my name."

A ferocious howl rang through the house, and it was followed by several doleful bumps and thumps. He knew that the poor baby had fallen downstairs again with his box of ninepins. You cannot be the father of a family without getting wise about sounds.

The noise sent his winged ideas on suicide flying, and he was angry. He remained sprawling obstinately by the fire. Let somebody else pick the baby up. There were plenty of them down-stairs; women who could see without its hurting and who never need trouble to think.

Then he abruptly bounced up, asking himself in furious self-abasement if an artist, the creature that he so often swore came of God, was merely a devil in most artful guise. He could understand all sins, participate in any madness to-day.

The poor little chap! He opened his attic door and hurried down the short flight of stairs; those stairs that the children were never allowed to play on. Milly tried valiantly to keep the house quiet because, as she said, his nerves were so irritable.

ous business for any young man to throw behind him, almost in its birth, the career he has chosen. Doctor Lloyd brooded on the death of his old friend Parsons. His face in the feeble light of the kerosene lamp was tragically sad and haggard and burned out.

"Winter's come, David," he said at last.

David nodded.

"Yes, winter's come. And James went away with the autumn. Poor James! It is winter for us old ones, and spring for you young ones." He relapsed into silence. "Winter," he said again, with a little shiver. "My boy, never give up your hope for the spring. . . . Winter—winter is sad."

"Why, father, you're down to-night."

The doctor forced a smile. "Maybe—just a little. I'm tired. I guess I'll go to bed."

"I would. You've had a hard day. Get a good night's rest."

"Yes, I'll go to bed, boy, for a long . . . night's . . . rest. Good night, my son."

David smiled. "Good night, father." He added, from some inexplainable impulse of tenderness, "I don't know what I'd do without you, father."

"Good night, David." The doctor turned away slowly toward the door. He came back softly, and bending over his

son's chair, kissed him on the forehead. Then he went hurriedly away.

When David arose the next morning he had made his decision. He would accept his fate and become the principal of the Fisherville High School. With his jaw rigidly set he went down-stairs to tell his father. The doctor had not yet appeared. He had never known him to be late for breakfast.

"Is father up, Hannah?" he asked.

"No, not yet. It's the first time in twenty years, I guess, that he's be'n late. I'll call him."

"No, I'll go to call him."

David ran up the stairs and knocked at his father's door. "Half past eight—breakfast is ready," he called. There was no answer. In sudden trepidation he knocked again. "Father," he cried, "breakfast!"

Again there was no answer. With nervous hands he tried the door. It was locked. The doctor was never wont to lock his door.

"Father! Father! Father!" and he beat desperately on the resounding wood. There was no sound within. With a terrible, horrified cry, he dashed his body against the door.

"*Father!*"

Echoes

BY BRIAN HOOKER

IN the old room, when May is ending
And day descending in the west,
Into a golden stillness blending
My memories of worst and best,

Yesterday clings about to-morrow,
Flinging a charm on time and place,
Till calm lights and pale shadows borrow
Frail visions of your vivid face;

And your voice calls from wall and rafter
Out of the long-forgotten years—
A song that sorrow follows after,
A laughter tremulous with tears.

He met her on the first flight, carrying the child. Its sweet, wet face, frightened eyes, and crumpled, fine hair broke him up. "Give him to me," he said huskily and, spreading his arms wide, taking this blossom between his palms.

"Oh, Gregory, I'm sorry. But you never work after lunch. He hasn't hurt himself a bit. He didn't make you break off in the middle of anything, did he?"

"I broke off and I was glad. Darling, can't you both come in a bit and stay with me?"

"Not for long." She stared at him. "It's my At Home day—have you forgotten? I expect some literary people who admire your work. Do come down?"

He had a way of moodily flying from her little parties.

"I'll see them hanged first," he said.

Yet he remembered the early time when he had downright worshipped "admirers of his work."

They sat down each side of the fire; he held the child.

"How dark the room is, dear!" she said; "no wonder it gets on your nerves. And it's such a beautiful day outside; the children have gone tobogganing."

"I've been outside in the beauty of it."

"Of course you have. What did the oculist say? The usual thing, I suppose; just a matter of new glasses. How often you want new glasses, don't you, Gregory, and such complicated lenses!"

"It isn't only glasses. He says I can't go on."

"Can't go on!" She looked fond; she looked subtly shrewish.

"Can't go on—going," he explained, drolly.

"Oh, do speak sense. You've got to go on, dearest. How should we keep this place up else? I suppose you mean that he said you want a holiday."

"That's about it. Don't worry."

"If I could only exchange houses with another family living at the seaside!" she said. This was Milly's annual project and it never came off.

"I hate the seaside—with sands, I mean."

"The country, then; but sea would be better for the children."

"Oh, I'm all right. I sha'n't take any notice of the fellow. These specialists are ravens." He kissed the baby's flushed face; it was sleeping at his shoulder. He kissed it as you'd kiss a petal. "He says it's neuralgia and I mustn't worry, that's all." He told her this and gave a raucous laugh.

"I can't think why you do worry. Things always do come right in the end; we turn the corner."

"I shall keep on giddily turning corners until I drop down dead, sweetheart."

The early courting word stirred her. She put her hand out and he took it. They sat quiet.

"I'm nailed to such a trumpery cross," he said, breaking the exquisite pause. "If it were only something big! If I were quite blind!"

"How can you be so wicked!" She twitched her hand away, leaving him comfortless; she regarded him, as she so often did, as the complete, the shocking and impious stranger.

"If I were blind, they'd give me a pound a week from the Civil List."

"Do you really think your reputation's big enough for that? I wonder? Anyway, we couldn't do much on a pound. The servants' wages come to more; and, by the way, Cook's are overdue."

"Wages are overdue at least three times a week! This perpetual appeal of bills and little boots," he caressed the child's plump delicious foot, "makes me tired. It's abominable," his eyes flashed, "that a man should spend his best spiritual self for material needs."

"Now you're talking as you write. Things must be paid for."

"They shall be." He brought gold instantly from his trousers pocket. "How much is Cook? You'll keep things down as much as you can, won't you?"

"Of course I will." She looked perplexed and aggrieved; she took the money.

"You had a story back this morning, didn't you?" she asked. "Poor old boy! I put it on your bed. I wouldn't wake you up; you looked so tired."

He stared at her neat head vaguely. She invariably seemed the strange woman when she came into his dressing-room early, her hair half done, and the

letters in her hand. Once upon a time she used to sit upon the edge of the bed while he read them, but the melancholy drooping of her mouth at the sight of checks, which were never big enough for their domestic needs, and her practical comments on matters more spiritual, spoiled his working-day. Now when she came in, he stealthily watched her through closed eyes. "I'm always tired in the morning," he said.

"Tired! And yet you sing when you are dressing. We shall never understand each other. Was it a story back?"

"Yes. They admit I'm a poet; yet demand more plot." He lifted his haggard, tender face. "We shall never understand each other, Milly, but that's no reason why we shouldn't go on loving."

He remembered that once, quite unwittingly, she had marked their complete dislocation, their eternal mismating, by sharply saying, "You irritate me by everything that you do." She was complacently thinking that, anyway, she understood him through and through. For he was nothing but a big, gifted baby.

He was recalling those hundreds of dumb and suffering times when, feeling that he had hurt her, he had gone to her in some whirl of bitter penitence. She had struck tenderness dead by a wide, uncomprehending stare.

He travelled back to the time of their courting. It had been to him unalloyed romance; it stood out quite divorced from the well-ordered sanity of their life to-day. His very children were not the vague babies of his ardent dreams.

He considered that, just as no priest may marry, so no poet should. He knew, never fearing to look deep within himself, that he might have given his heart—or bits of his heart and each time believing it to be the whole—to lots of women. This affair—of Love—was like your latest book. It was the thing you lived for, yearned over, wanted more than anything. And yet the time surely came when the thing which had stood so close retreated. It was in a fog and you could no longer find it. Love and Art were alike. Yet there must be for him out in the wide world the one woman, the perfect love; with the gift of soothing and feeding and setting to sleep. He was so glad that he had never

found her, for wouldn't he have been faithful! Fate at least had spared him this. Yet he was always wide awake and always hungry.

He was consistently loyal to Milly. He in no way undervalued her devotion. Dear little woman! Her virtues were so nicely packed up in an automatic box. You just put in a penny and took one out—the difficulty was, that he had nothing less than silver.

"If you could only get plots like Poulton," she was saying; she was always suggesting things.

"Poulton! His gift is of a handy size; he slips it in his pocket. Writers of that kind make my tragedy. Even if a good magazine is started these agreeable hacks have it all their own way. They are so diabolically clever; they look like the real thing. I've nearly been taken in myself sometimes by stuff that Poulton has done. But it's all spangles. It wouldn't be so bad if I were just beginning. But I'm a personage; I'm Gregory Gotch. My small exclusive public says, 'There's a new book out by Gotch.' My name always sounds to me like a German expletive! I've lost my first sweet, sharp joy in the thing. Some one wrote the other day about my high imaginative flights—well, I want to sit down and arrange my pinions. I've made my little vogue and had my little flutter."

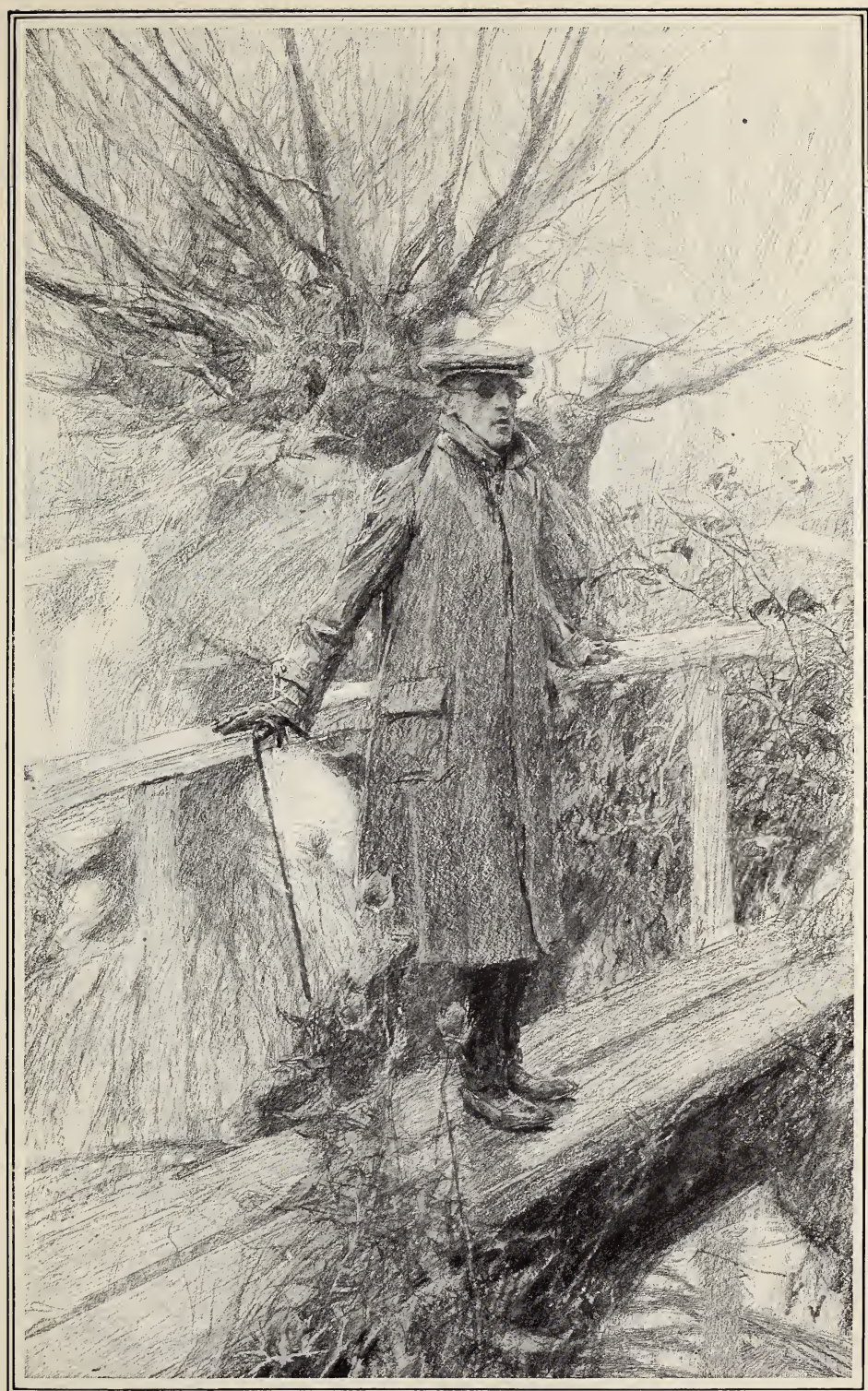
"You were fluttering," she said, quite brightly, "when we first met."

"So I was, my darling." He spoke with a gulp.

He had met her at a polite party just after the appearance of his first book. He had been quite light-headed at the experience of being on equal terms with gentlefolk. What trivial things pleased you and seemed to matter when you were quite young!

He was of free, wild, lowly blood; license in it and long endurance. Battlings with weather, hard pinchings of hunger, rude speech and primitive emotions plainly expressed—all of this had been in his peasant people for generations. Milly's blood was of a skimmed professional elegance gone blue. Yet this impressed him very much, and he had relied on her to make him a gentleman.

"How pleased I was at first and



Drawn by W. Hatherell, R.I.

Half-tone plate engraved by F. A. Pettit

IT WAS AN ENCHANTING WORLD

proud! I was caught by the usual things: letters from strangers applauding me, enchanting whispers across seas from unknown lands; portraits in the papers, my first proofs, press notices—all of it. And it's so stale now; I only want to sell well, so that we may pay our bills in peace. My first-born book! How spiritual it was! Don't you understand?"

She shook her head. This noisy bubbling brook of his speech amazed, horrified, hurt, magnetized, and exhausted her. She could not help thinking him most unnatural in lots of ways; moreover, most conceited.

"No, I don't. I wish you wouldn't talk so fast. I wish you wouldn't tell me everything." She swore by decencies of the soul.

He laughed. There was one thing at least that he hadn't told her. One word—suicide—was left unspoken.

"What shall I be doing twenty-five years hence if I'm alive?" he asked, tragically.

"Why, getting an idea for your autumn novel just as usual. Have you got an idea yet, Gregory?"

"I don't know. I've got something, but it may be no good. Or again, it may be wonderful."

He always talked like that before the birth of a book. She was disgusted. "If you could make a reputation under another name and in another style," she said, helplessly, "or if you could get a theme that would make people ask one another questions. Poulton does that. I'm so awfully glad you can't do sensational books; but if you could, putting in all your nice subtle touches, there would be a fortune in it."

She looked at him in such an appealing pure way. She had a beautiful complexion, mild eyes, and faint brows. He wondered if those naked faces were so pure, after all.

The door-bell rang and she arose. "I must go down. Don't worry about your eyes, darling. There can't be much the matter with them; they look so bright. Give me baby."

"No, I'll keep him; he comforts me."

"How funny you are!" She lightly kissed him just above the bright, strained eyes. "Yet sometimes you can't bear the children near you."

Gregory, left alone, sat hugging suicide and the child. He tried to drive guilt from his heart by the close pressure of innocence. His brain was ablaze and he could no longer bear it. The top of his head was blistering and peeling off! The room was tight packed with every variety of devil; the Tempter himself was stage-managing the lot.

He lifted the child; it still slept. He looked at the beautiful thing, which as yet was all perfect body and nothing else. The hidden soul was not awake to strife. Perhaps suicide would be better both for him and the boy: since the world was a desert—mirage and famine.

He slipped out from the study, looking his last. Passing the table he picked something up. It was a pair of green glasses; the oculist had ordered him to wear them when the light hurt. "If they were red," he grinned, "that would do the job. I'd go gorgeously blind in a red blaze without any more fuss, and they'd put me on the Civil List."

In the lobby just outside were cloaks and hats. He took a wide fur thing with a hood and rolled the baby in it. The horrible order and shininess of the house enraged him. There were sharpness and violence to it, and he could see through that hulking staircase window the acute red gables of other villas. He yearned for those houses in the country; long, low, and restful, hemmed in by barns and homely buildings.

As he tiptoed past the drawing-room he could well imagine Milly apologizing for his absence. She would say that "literary men were so singular." She was speaking now. He lingered, and it came to him in snatches: something about orders for short stories and it not being always convenient for him to turn them off to order. Bless her! She was bragging about him for all she was worth in the sick hope that—so—she was helping to sell his books.

He left the house and walked through lost streets of uncorrupt gentility. He went and wandered in a new park; trying, in stripped, shaved stretches, to fell the devil and find God.

"If I could do a decent day's manual work, paid by the hour and always regular, and then come home and walk

in the park with a kid on my arm, I could be happy," he said, staring at a world which his glasses softened into soothing green.

Next day he began his book. He put down, he moulded into beautiful shape, the things that he had felt and suffered. He told the world, for the first time, how dreadfully hungry of the soul he was and always had been. This book should be, before God, the final thing. He wrote about suicide before committing it. And he knew that he could not die until the book was done—it insisted on being got through with.

As days went on and the manuscript grew, he said to himself more than once with a silly snigger, "Will it be devilish good or dastardly bad?" That was the worst of it—you could never be sure. You were studying all the time, and wasn't it an infamy that all students were not properly provided for!

It came so easily, so madly—yet with such a deliberate and stately sanity. Words and sentences fell at once into lovely lawful order, and he said his best phrases to himself over and over again. Never before had he worked so fast and with such strange joy.

The money question whipped him up as usual. The balance at the bank was running low—but what matter!

When it was done he felt that he hadn't a word of any sort left in him. As he read it over for the last time his eyes played queer tricks. "They seem to sort of—slip," he said, childishly, and took his glasses off to solemnly polish them.

He packed the thing up, not knowing whether he loved or hated it, and sent it to the *Bugle*. He never read newspapers, yet he knew from Poulton, who considered himself too good for it, that this new paper was crude and bulky, backed by a millionaire and determined to succeed. What would they make of his stuff? It was rather a pity that he wouldn't be here to see. For he was going into the country to kill himself. The book said so—the way and the when of it he had written in the book.

He took a last look round the big attic which for years had been his study. Here he had lived his hidden life, here

he had died to the world. It was full of his characters, this place, it was melodious with his phrases.

A piano-organ started playing in the street. He loved piano-organs; they somehow brought back the gayety of things lost. He couldn't explain, he hadn't a word left. He only hoped that Milly wouldn't send the thing away—she never gauged his loves and hates. She was always blindly doing things for his good, always curbing his fleet impulses by saying, "You mustn't do this to-day because you've got to do that to-morrow and you'll be so tired"—remarks like that!

Later on in the day, he went downstairs and said to her quite simply: "I'm going into the country; I can't stand it any more. My eyes hurt. I've got a few pounds in my pocket. The wages are paid up. You said so this morning, didn't you? Now don't go saying that you didn't. I've left a check—ten pounds on account—for Tomson." Tomson was the coal merchant, and they owed him twenty.

Milly did not protest or show surprise; something in his face kept her quiet. "Well, come into the schoolroom and say good-by to the children," she said, airily.

Apparently she understood. He nearly put his tired head down upon her shoulder—but that would have been trying her emotional intelligence too far. It was one of her stock remarks to say, "You are so tense, you exhaust yourself." Now he knew quite well that naturally he was a sleek creature. With her, he simply clamored all the time—for a food she couldn't give.

He kissed his children. This was a tragic occasion; he felt that he ought to feel things, say things. But he hadn't a feeling or a word left. He kissed Johnny, the eldest, last of all. He felt that there was a potential threat to Johnny, who was getting big enough, his mother said, to go to boarding-school. Ye gods and little fishes! And who was going to pay the bills?

As he went away, he said: "Don't send letters after me and don't expect me to write. I want to rest my eyes."

"It's just as well you should be out of the way through the spring cleaning,"

said Milly. She was in the first poignant stages of this festival, and she was so glad to see him go. He would come back full of ideas and the whitewashers would be gone.

The last memory he had of the place was the starched pink skirts of servants. "I'm going out to kill myself to pay for their starch," he said, peevishly. Why should he feed and house and pay three lusty serving-women? They were picking his brains bare. Dear little Milly! She was a fool. Any stockbroker's wife could do this social trick better. He would not see Milly again or the children. This seemed queer.

He sat in the train saying bits of his book and remembering the things that he must be sure to do, the order into which his deeds should fall—a brave, well-organized, a most original march to Death. The book was he, and he was the book, and whether the thing got printed or not, never mattered.

It was March, and the weather was what people call bad. The light was brown and tender; how ineffably it rested the dry burning of his eyes! The soft rain fell, and he walked through it caressed by vague mists. Pollard trees leaning across narrow, slow streams, which wound through pasture land, bewitched him. He came across a deep rose-patch of uncut osiers, and the color sent him crazy: say that it converted him! Subtly, resolve shifted. He loved the lime-green lichen at the base of tree trunks. He drank in at dusk the songs of jovial careless blackbirds who weight-ed down the delicate branches.

It was an enchanting world, and you couldn't possibly cut yourself adrift from it. He was becoming false to the tenets of the book. It had gone away from him into the usual fog—as all books did, as Love did! He would go home and it would be waiting for him on the study table in a new brown paper gown! The editor of the *Bugle* would express his regrets.

He felt a better man. The blackbirds' song was blither, soft rain sweetened to nectar in his mouth. He would not go through the portal of the coward's gate, the name of which was Suicide. He turned his face toward home.

It was late night when he reached his road in the select new suburb. There were only a few lights in bedroom windows, and he was humbly grateful for that—since he could not see much of the ghastly wide place with young trees on each side, and well-kept, well-fed villas. The incredibly idiotic name of his particular one was Tifflyn. He saw the gold letters over the door and he longed to throw a stone at it.

To his amazement, the dining-room blinds were up and in the lighted room sat Milly, her idle hands flung out across the large empty table. She looked strange. A great fear took him; feeling and the sense of words. He had barely spoken to any one for a fortnight.

This was a tawdry casket. He glared at the steep walls, yet it held his jewels. He looked up, thinking of five little heads fast asleep. He shook all over, he was clammy with speculation as he put his latch-key in the door.

Milly heard him and came flying out. The woman was distraught. She pitched herself into his arms and poured over him the most violent torrent of weeping. He hadn't supposed that she could be the source of such a storm. Meek, sweet little landscape of a Milly! He was thinking in the pure terms of Nature.

"Oh," she gasped, "why didn't you tell me? The letter came to-night. It's on the mantelpiece."

"What letter?" He crossed the room in a dream.

"From the *Bugle*. Open it. Don't you know that you've won the three-thousand-pound prize they offered for the best serial by a famous writer? Haven't you seen it on the posters?"

She was speaking savagely, he was stupidly fingering the letter. "I—I kept away from towns," he stammered.

"Well—well, open it, can't you?"

Looking docile, he did so, and she saw the check flutter in his fingers.

"It has eased my shoulder from the burden, my hands are delivered from the making of pots," he quoted.

She wondered what he meant; she was afraid that he was going to break down. That would be just like him. His mouth trembled and there was the queerest play of muscles in his cheeks.

She moved, her limbs looking weak



Drawn by W. Hatherell, R.I.

"OH, WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?"

beneath the wrapper she wore, and picking up a newspaper from the side table.

"Is it three thousand pounds?" she asked. "They say it is a record offer. There is a long paragraph all about it. Look here."

He nodded; he held the check out. Milly took it and kept it safe. For he might burn it; he looked wild enough for anything. You could never be sure of him.

"You must cash it early to-morrow morning," she said, speaking with the unquenchable timidity of woman when it comes to finance. She was trembling all over.

"Oh, my darling"—he laughed like a madman, he dragged her into his arms and covered her head with kisses—"that's all right. Those brutes on the *Bugle* are made of money."

She broke away, she held the paper up. Her eyes were tender and shining. Never before had she looked so utterly proud of him.

"Here it is, the first instalment. 'Suicide,' by Gregory Gotch. Did you ever see such enormous letters? A morbid title; you don't mind my saying so? What on earth made you choose it?"

"Give it to me." He took it from her; he stared through some happy winking mist. "What's it look like? I shall have to read the thing," he said, thoughtfully.

He shuddered at the flimsy paper, at the puffs of somebody's particular pills. His sensitive soul was asking itself questions which in this spacious moment seemed suddenly small. "Did Poulton have a shot at the thing?" he said to himself, and then: "What will my public say to this? and will it send up the sale of my other books?"

"I knew you must be doing something particular"—Milly sounded merry—"but you looked so fierce when you came down to meals that I didn't dare ask."

"I didn't even know that they offered a prize," he explained. "I've never touched a single issue of the thing—I sent it off as a joke—it was grim enough fooling. I thought I'd play as low down as ever I could."

His head dropped suddenly. She had never before noticed how worn he looked,

how stretched and yellowed. This writing was a great strain on him; for he would put too much emotion into his work.

"There's a letter with the check," she said. "You haven't even read it."

"Read it to me." He gave it her.

"They want an illustrated interview, for which they'll pay extra. What awfully generous people! I like this *Bugle*. You've got to tell the public how you did it; explain your mode of production—that sort of thing. You know, you've done it before."

He stood there grinning. She had expected him to be more grateful, more enthusiastic. He took it all with his usual most annoying arrogance.

"Three thousand pounds at four per cent."—she sat down, touching the check gently, as she touched her new babies when they came—"is one hundred and twenty pounds a year. You can get four per cent. quite safely upon mortgage. Papa used to say so. We shall have something behind us. We sha'n't," she borrowed a phrase of his, "stand giddy on the edge of things."

"Look here," he tossed the paper from him and his face was fierce, "I mean to get something for myself out of this." He spoke most rebelliously.

"Something for yourself?"

"Rather!" The odd quick fury of him seemed to die and, softly, he knelt down to slide an arm round her waist. "We'll get out of this. I insist. We'll go and live in the country where things are cheap and green and quiet."

"I should like that," she returned, equably. "I've come to the conclusion that a villa in the suburbs is vulgar."

How sad it was that he could never gauge her! He had been quite prepared for a little firework display of indignant social squibs and crackers.

"It would be nice." Her eyes were shining—what pretty trustful eyes they were! "We could have a donkey cart for the children."

Gregory flung back his gloriously happy head, and his wife surveyed for a moment the radiant creature who long ago had courted her.

"A donkey cart!" he said. "Darling! It shall be drawn by striped, unbroken zebras."

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